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ABSTRACT

This report describes an early intervention program designed to prevent first grade failure. It includes an explanation of the program's objectives, activities, evaluation, and findings; short summaries of the program's background, content, cost effectiveness analysis, and evaluation procedures; and the conclusions and recommendations of a four-member validation team. (SET)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD PREVENTIVE CURRICULUM

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This project is one of the Florida Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title III projects validated as innovative, effective, cost-effective, and exportable during 1973. The information which follows has been excised from the project's validation report and is composed of

(1) an abstract featuring the focus of the project, the objectives, the activities, the evaluation, and the findings;

(2) a summary of the project for exportability featuring an introduction, the context of the program, a program description, a cost-effectiveness analysis, and a description of the evaluation procedures; and

(3) the conclusions and recommendations of the four member, out-of-state validation team on innovativeness, effectiveness/success, cost effectiveness, and exportability.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD PREVENTIVE CURRICULUM

Reading: First Grade

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ABSTRACT

FOCUS: The purpose of the project was to develop an early-identification, early intervention program to prevent first grade failure. Historically fifteen to twenty percent of the first-grade population experience learning problems in the conventional classroom, resulting in a first grade retention rate that is higher than in any other grade. To achieve the stated purpose, the project has focused attention on: the learner--how to best diagnose his instructional needs; the teacher--how she can be better trained to meet student needs; and the learning environment--how it can be organized to facilitate a diagnostic-prescriptive instructional program.

OBJECTIVES: The major objectives of the project were:

The Learner: The learner will develop prereading perceptual, cognitive and language skills which will enable him to respond to instruction and to learn to read.

The Teacher: The teachers who receive special training will demonstrate competencies in diagnostic-prescriptive teaching skills indicated by their ability to select appropriate instruction, individualize learning tasks, and develop a productive learning environment for "high-risk" students.

The Learning Environment: Each project classroom will be established as an all day primary learning laboratory which provides an appropriate environment for individual and small group instruction and independent learning activiites.

ACTIVITIES: Major activities to achieve the objectives included:

1. Development of an assessment battery to diagnose prereading perceptual student needs.

2. Development of taped listening lessons to build students' cognitive and language skills.

3. Development of an inservice program for teachers and aides, including workshops and individualized on-site assistance and support to enhance insights and skills.

4. Development of classroom organization techniques which include needs grouping of students, physical arrangement of class to accommodate learning centers, and the use of key-coded instructional materials.

5. Development and prescriptive use of instructional methods and materials which are appropriate to the learning style and learning needs of students.

EVALUATION: Second year evaluation strategies included: pre- and post-testing of matched samples of control and experimental classes on a standardized prereading battery and a test of cognitive abilities, and a comparison of post-test scores on standardized measures of reading achievement. Also growth in self-concept and attitude toward school was measured. Evaluation of teacher and learning environment objectives was accomplished with rating by an outside expert observer using performance based observation checklists.

FINDINGS: Data for second year of operation show greater gains for project over control students in both the prereading and cognitive abilities tests, despite the generally higher risk prediction of the project students. In addition, project reading achievement exceeded expectations for high risk students. Project teachers evidenced marked gains in observed performance of diagnostic-prescriptive teaching skills. Among the unique features of this first grade failure prevention program were:

1. The focus on the prevention, in contrast to the remediation of academic failure.

2. The creation of a learning environment which facilitates a diagnostic-prescriptive instructional program.

3. The use of an assessment battery to identify pupils' specific prereading perceptual needs.

4. The development of a key-coded catalogue of instructional materials to guide teacher planning.

5. The development and production of a variety of learning activities and materials which support the instructional program.

6. The focus on building positive student self-concept and improving attitude toward school by providing success-oriented learning experiences.

EXPORTABILITY OF PROJECT

A. INTRODUCTION

Failure to learn to read has been the major reason for failure in first grade. In addition, the rate of failure in first grade exceeds that of any other grade in the elementary school. As a consequence of these factors, a program which is effective and not cost prohibitive in reducing the rate of failure and increases in chances for success in first grade appears to have an attraction for adoption by a school district. Not only are short term gains an advantage for a school district in terms of enhancing emotional effects on a pupil and his family, but the savings to a school system is substantial. In the 1971-72 school year the percentage of first grade failure in the State of Florida was 6.60%. In 1970-71 it was 6.96%. In the 1970-71 school year Dade County promoted 17,890 first graders and retained 1,146, a 6.0% failure rate. Based on the actual ADA pupil expenditure of $950.00 in the 1970-71 school year, the exact cost of having those pupils repeat was $1,088,700.00.

B. CONTEXT OF PROGRAM

The Dade County Schools represent the nations sixth largest school system. It functions as a county unit. The administrative staff includes seven area superintendents, one for each of the decentralized geographic areas and one for district adult and high school technical and vocational program. The Dade County School Board employs more than 17,000 full-time persons and has an annual budget for the system of approximately $287,000,000.

Among the positive considerations for adoption is the ease of utilization of regular normal space requirements for any classroom and the need for very little extra expenditure of funds for capital outlay. Rechanneling of normal expenditures for capital outlay and for instructional materials may be needed for adoption. Of special consideration is the need for a full-time paraprofessional

aide per project teacher and the support personnel necessary for needed inservice staff development.

C. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The scope of the program involved white-black-spanish language origin-children who had needs to achieve successfully, to maintain or develop a positive self-concept and to relate acceptably to others. In addition the teachers involved in the program needed special training in (a) the strategies which are effective for initial teaching, (b) how to reinforce skills, (c) how to provide for proper pacing of instruction, (d) how to organize data for ease of retrievability, (e) how to write instructional prescriptions, and (f) how to organize materials for immediate availability and individualization of instruction.

Careful planning and organization of furniture, equipment, and diagnostically prescribed instruction and learning resources are necessary to create a primary learning laboratory which provides a full-time instructional program for children whose prognosis at school entrance is predicted as high risk toward academic failure.

An inservice program series was designed to be competency-based to (a) meet expressed needs identified by teachers and (b) relate to the identification and instruction of high risk children in the program. The paraprofessional aides are included in inservice sessions with teachers to gain a basic understanding of the goals of the program and the nature of their supportive roles.

The facilities used were varied, ranging from outmoded but usable, to new facilities. All were currently used as regular primary classrooms.

All necessary materials and equipment to develop the project were purchased by project funds. A hexagonal listening station was the single expensive piece of capital outlay expenditure. Other capital outlay was for purchase of A-V equipment to be used exclusively within the project. Materials purchase included a variety of commercially produced instructional resources.

The project budget has included decreases in capital outlay as was expected. The wide variety of instructional materials purchased each year suited the needs of innovative experimentation. Refinements in the three years have led to the development of minimal lists of equipment and materials.

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D. COST EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS

Developmental costs were totally borne by the LEA as a function of on-going program planning and development. Start-up costs included the purchase of some items of equipment and materials which need not be duplicated by an adopter. The operational costs in excess of that which an LEA normally expends per-pupil are those for the services of a paraprofessional aide and that which is required to provide additional staff to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio to about 20:1, and to provide for the services of specialists to coordinate the project and to implement necessary inservice and evaluation activities.

E. EVALUATION

In the first year of operation no control population existed. For the second year of project funding a within-school control group existed. For the third year an independent outside control group was used. Pre-post testing on intelligence, reading achievement, self-concept and attitude toward school indicated gains made by experimental groups generally exceeded the controls during the second year of the project. The results of third year funding period are not available at this writing. Criterion referenced assessments and reading achievement tests on project children indicated continuous growth in the acquisition of prereading and reading skills.

Controls will be evaluated at end of school year. Recommendations of on-site visitors were incorporated in project program each year and the design has been refined to include a more clearly delineated management and systematic approach to reading instruction of the high risk pupil.

The development of a group assessment technique rather than an individual clinical evaluation represents a major unanticipated outcome. This has led to a more economical (time and resources) approach to diagnosis of learning needs. It has gained widespread use within the LEA and dissemination outside the LEA. The creation of games and instructional activities which include self-correcting features as well as total response modes has also been an unanticipated result. The creative use of audio-taped story books and follow-up activities add a unique dimension to the project's innovative approach to instruction.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. INNOVATIVENESS

The validation team supports the LEA and SEA claim that the project concept and rationale for products, procedures and staff configuration are innovative.

B. EFFECTIVENESS/SUCCESS

Although systematic and comprehensive evaluation has been difficult due to staffing and other problems, it is felt that the current (1972-73) evaluation design is more adequate than those of the first two years.

Concerns for the evaluation strategy include: the need for improving specification of objectives; systematizing procedures for collecting and processing data; and the need for tests of reliability for some of the instruments used.

The validation team feels that the changes desired in teachers and learners have substantially occurred and that project objectives are being reached.

C. COST EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS/ECONOMICAL

Because of the nature of the validation instrument and because of some differences between the procedures used by the LEA in the accounting of local and ESEA Title III funds, it was difficult to make adequate cost effectiveness analysis comparisons.

The validation team feels that even though costs per child seemed high, the project outcomes were also high. Also, as much of this represented the costs of development, which do not necessarily have to be borne by an adopting agency, the team feels that the project can be replicated at moderate cost.

D. EXPORTABILITY

Project materials indicate a need for extensive staff development. Project teachers require and display curriculum knowledge and diagnostic skills in excess of that found in other classroom teachers. However, processes used to achieve this expertise are presently not well documented, making it difficult for an adopting agency to develop similar levels of skill. It is recommended that the project staff complete the "Procedures Manual" and include descriptions of inservice activities, process specifications and teacher objectives.